**Poetry**

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To situate the contemporary Chinese Poetry among the afterlives of Maoist China is very problematic, above all for the very nature of the poetry, which is a karst river surfacing discontinuously, in unpredicted points and moments, making it very difficult to locate its springs and tributaries. With the added complication that the main novelty in the field of Chinese poetry is the wave of excellent poems written by migrant workers.

Such a ‘sociological’ feature reopens a crucial political problem of modern China: what has been and what could be the role of the workers in a project of collective emancipation beyond capitalism? The permanence of a simulacrum of the "working class", mummified in the insignia of power, strikes even more with the lyrical realism of these new worker poets, who are fully aware of the radical political inexistence of the workers in China today. A close source of inspiration is certainly the Misty poetry emerged at the end of the seventies, which brought to light the deadly ambiguities of the role played by poetry and art in the revolutionary culture. Another hidden source, perhaps the most paradoxical, is that Mao himself was one of the great poets of the twentieth century, although he wrote in classical regulated verses.

Finally, one could say that the richest source of the contemporary appearance of this karst river, is still the immense Chinese poetic tradition, whose most authentic voices were driven by a sense of profound introspection about the place of poetry in the China’s cultural space. In fact, the best Chinese poets and writers have always illuminated key dilemmas of China’s identity. In the last 40 years poetry had shed a peculiar light—a ‘glitter among the interstices,’[[1]](#endnote-1) as Xiao Kaiyu, one of the main Chinese contemporary poets, put it—on the very meaning, past, present, and future of ‘China.’ For China’s writers and poets, ‘China is a big question mark’[[2]](#endnote-2) and a vast unexplored territory of ‘another China’[[3]](#endnote-3) accessible to poetic exploration.

In the words of Meng Lang, a poet recently passed away: ‘the poet stays in the blind places of history.’[[4]](#endnote-4) These places are perfectly adapted to the new migrant poets. Despite the rhetoric of twentieth century state communism, which praised the worker as the brightest ‘historical’ figure, today the worker toils away in the dark shadow of history. The intersection of artistic creation and wage slavery in the new wave of migrant worker poets must resist its own obscurity and bring to light the conditions of life at the bottom of the global capitalist production chain.

This path of poetic investigation was opened by an artistic group labelled ‘Misty Poets’ (*menglong shiren*) which was formed in 1978–80 by the editors of the underground journal *Jintian* (*Today*). Although it was forced to shut down in 1980, the group was re-founded abroad in June 1990. This generation of young poets had grown up during the Cultural Revolution, which had given them a chance to taste a sense of equality. In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, the political language of Maoism, however, became anaemic and impoverished, emptied of its revolutionary intensity and emancipatory promise . Following Mao’s death, the poets began to sense the risk of annihilation of their own creative experimental enthusiasm. In response, they dedicated themselves to a bold exploration of hidden possibilities within the Chinese language, creating new openings for thought, which reverberated across the entire Chinese intellectual horizon, not only poetry and novels, but also cinema, visual arts, architecture, music, and much more.

Misty poets and the migrant worker poets are two distinct poetic configurations that, while born three decades apart, are engaging in a significant dialogue. The main ground of convergence is the concept of poetry as an independent intellectual space distant from the dominant culture and the governmental discourse. Moreover, both groups share a peculiar sensitivity towards labour. Most of the early Misty Poets had experience as ordinary labourers, as ‘educated youth’ (*zhishi qingnian*) in the countryside, or as workers in factories during the Cultural Revolution. Famous poets such as Bei Dao and Shu Ting were factory workers, Mang Ke worked in a fishing village, and Yang Lian was in the countryside—experiences that bring them closer to the migrant poets.

*Living the Changing Chinese Workplace*

Through these biographical experiences of contemporary Chinese poets one can glimpse the epoch-making changes of factory life in China after 1949. There have been at least three eras of Chinese factories: the early period of socialist construction in the 1950s; the intermediate, experimental period of the 1960s and 1970s; and then the post-Maoist period with its neoliberal factories.

The poems written by workers during the era of socialist construction expressed a positive attitude and optimistic participation in the socialist project, as in ‘Factory Morning,’ a poem written by Li Xue'ao in 1957:

The valiant chimney is like the mast of a ship,  
it rises high at the centre of the factory.  
The towering plant is the ship cabin,  
the Party secretary here is our red pilot,  
when all around all still sleeps quietly,  
we sound the siren and set sail  
bringing millions of heroic hearts we enter one wider day.[[5]](#endnote-5)

These were poems that glorified labour. However, the meaning, practice, and organisation of labour all radically changed during the Cultural Revolution. The Misty Poets who lived during this intermediate period witnessed and participated in a variety of experiments, such as attempts to mitigate the division of labour; remould the relationships between workers, technicians, and managers; and produce ‘theory’ through the existence of ‘worker theoretical groups’ active in the factories, as well as ‘worker universities’

These experiments in emancipation from factory despotism and the unprecedented space for intellectual pursuits among the workers contributed the overall atmosphere in Chinese factories during the Cultural Revolution. Yu Jian captures this multi-faceted situation in a recent reflection on his decennial experience as a worker before becoming a professor of literature and one of the greatest contemporary poets:

In my factory there were figures of the past who had been labelled rightists, ex-movie actors, painters, dancers, a variety of owners of the old society, descendants of capitalists, and intellectuals. These were highly educated people, a sort of living textbook, and they became my teachers. I remember well the time in the plant, the funniest thing was the storytelling—many people told stories and putting them together seemed like novels in which they all spoke. In that factory there were frequent power outages, so we had plenty of time to tell stories. Now when I think about it, the factory was like a secret art school … . I remember that in the factory I had time to write poetry, sing, play the flute, there was painting, writing of ancient poetry, studying philosophy of science, we listened to the Voice of America … even western literary works from the eighteenth and nineteenth century circulated in private. I even read Shi Zhi’s poems, the brochures by Robespierre, and also Herzen and Chekhov. [[6]](#endnote-6)

Described in this way, certain factory spaces in the Cultural Revolution functioned as ‘communist heterotopias’ in which traditional factory logic and temporality were suspended, and new capacities, relations, and senses of the world could take place.

For today’s migrant poets, the subjective condition of life in the factory is radically different from both the classic socialist era and the experimental interval of the Cultural Revolution. The collective ‘us’ has blotted into ‘a massively single number’ (*pangda de danshu*), to borrow a line from poet Guo Jinniu.[[7]](#endnote-7) It is a poetic description of the radical absence of sociality, the boundless eradication of identity and belonging in which the only relationship with the ‘motherland’ is ‘my payment for the temporary residence permit.’ As Guo writes with bitter sarcasm:

A person crosses a province, another province, another province

A person takes a train, then a truck, and then a black bus again

Next stop

The motherland has given me a temporary residence permit.

The motherland accepted my payment for the temporary residence permit.

…

Sister Li of the North, stands alone facing South in untidy pajamas

Sister Li of the North, embraces a broken chrysanthemum

Sister Li of the North, hangs from a banyan tree

Lightly. As if her flesh and bones did not weigh.

Alas, I could not arrive to help her.[[8]](#endnote-8)

*Strangers to Themselves*

‘Sister Li of the North, hangs from a banyan tree’ and the author is devastated for arriving too late to help her. Strange destiny for a poet to arrive in the place where someone has just killed oneself! In another poem, ‘Going Home on Paper’ (*zhishang huanxiang*), Guo portrays himself as a worker charged with putting up the nets on the top floor of the factory (this was a well-known measure taken by Foxconn managers to prevent the reoccurrence of suicides among young workers). For the poet it is an excruciating job that cannot but remind him of those who have jumped. The poem is like a funeral that brings the young boy back home, though only ‘on paper.’

1.  
The boy, at dawn, counts from the first to the thirteenth floor  
ends up counting and arrived on the top floor  
he  
flies, oh, flies

he cannot imitate the birds’ movements …

…

3.

Thirteenth floor, I'm putting the anti-jump nets, this is my job  
to earn a payday  
with force turn clockwise, tighten the screws bit by bit,

fight and resist in the darkness  
the more I use force, the more dangerous it is … . [[9]](#endnote-9)

The poet searches in verse for a way to survive and resist the self-destructiveness of wage slavery.

Another migrant poet, Xing Huangtian, points out that ‘we do not know anything’ about workers today and their depressing labour in the deadly repetition of the factory.[[10]](#endnote-10) How far from the Chinese Dream is the verse ‘Dreams decreasing, slowness increasing?’[[11]](#endnote-11) In a poem simply titled ‘He’ (*ta*), the worker is unidentifiable, not only outside the factory, where ‘he’ is virtually invisible, but even inside the factory. ‘He’ is the stranger—even to himself—who works at the next machine. Everyone is locked in one’s own obsessions:

It is always like this, day after day, month after month

year after year, time going by,

machinery wearing out, physical strength running out

dreams decreasing, slowness increasing.

It is always like this, always

feeling blue, except for labour,

except for love. It is like innate that

we do not know anything about him

we do not know what

this person is grounded on, neither

his obsession, but is this the obsession

that we do not have.[[12]](#endnote-12)

*Fatalism*

What it means to be a worker in the modern world constitutes an intellectual enigma, which requires renewed conceptual inquiry. Previous theoretical-political attempts—Marxism above all – to explain the worker as a political subjectivity and not merely an economic reality have fallen into a period of confusion and disorientation. It is unclear what a worker’s existence can be grounded in beyond mere survival.

In this era, when political visions about labour have become rarefied, the poetry of migrant workers can be read as a symptom of unmoored subjective existence. Surely, they are a ‘massively single number,’ but can this number become a collective entity? My tentative answer is to consider the ‘us’ of the ‘worker’ in these poems as animated, at least temporarily, by a ‘rational fatalism,’[[13]](#endnote-13) condensed in the following lines by Xu Lizhi: ‘I cannot accuse, I cannot complain/I can only suffer my exhaustion.’[[14]](#endnote-14) Though this statement is written in the first person, I suggest that it should be read as an ‘us’ representing any worker.

As young Marx wrote: ‘To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions.’[[15]](#endnote-15) This intellectual lucidity on the conditions of wage labour generates an intense realistic lyricism. This lyrical power of unflinching insight can be felt in the portrayal of the radical social inexistence of migrant workers in the following two poems by Ji Zhishui—a remarkable woman poet.[[16]](#endnote-16) While migrants all come from the rural area to work in the cities, they neither reflect peasant characteristics nor fit into the urban ‘Chinese dream.’ They are merely ‘rocks piling up by the side of the road,’ and leaves of grass that on encountering a gust of wind are ‘stripped of a rippling smile/stripped of the most basic respect,’ and finally are ‘leaves falling down into the dust.’

*Rocks by the Road*

A gust of wind   
blows us up from the land  
and down onto machines in a strange place, down onto assembly line  
plunged into noise, machine oil, red and black gum, white lead, rust  
beaten, screwed tight, nailed up  
our quick spinning   
flings off our accents and shouts and warm tears   
until we can’t squeeze out another droplet of sweat  
and we harden into rocks  
left by the side of the road  
even if we go home we don’t know how to farm  
these rocks piling up by the side of the road  
lean against one another, cold against cold

*Migrant Workers*

These grasses often  
encounter a kind of wind  
like a basin of cold water being sprinkled out  
stripped of a vibrating heartbeat, stripped of a rippling smile

stripped of the most basic respect

we head down

like leaves falling down into the dust

looking for food in the dirt, in garbage piles

these people still want to run, still want to escape

but that only brings them into the trap

others rush onto the knife’s point

these grasses are often

thin and weak

The last five verses expose the internal weakness of ‘rational fatalism.’ While insight is a necessary prerequisite for the emergence of subjective existence, it is not enough to prevent self-destruction. The same movement ‘to run’ and ‘to escape’ ultimately leads to a trap, and even pushes some of the ‘grass leaves’ to ‘rush onto the knife's point.’

To consistently maintain the ‘line’ of not hoping for anything and not complaining about anything is extremely difficult—a titanic endeavour requiring an ascetic-heroic attitude, which constantly risks transforming into its opposite. Under these constraints, as soon as one gives into the poetic urge to lament one’s own sufferings, one risks succumbing to the ‘hope’ of recognition from the society which they ostensibly reject. And since every desire for recognition involves the frustration of misrecognition, this ambivalence ends up annihilating the starting point of not hoping and not complaining.

*The Tragedy of Xu Lizhi*

In 2014, Xu Lizhi, a 24-year-old migrant worker at one of the Foxconn factories in Shenzhen, committed suicide, leaving behind a vast, remarkable poetic body posthumously published by his worker friends. Any suicide is always an enigma that cannot be reduced to a single cause, even less, I would argue, to an act of resistance. Even his biographic details cannot explain his tragic decision, as they are no sadder than those of the other migrants. Regardless of the reasons for his suicide, we should consider his verses independently from his tragic fate. An example is ‘I Swallowed an Iron Moon’ (*wo yanxia yi mei tiezuo de yueliang*), which has become the emblem of Chinese migrant workers poetry.

*I Swallowed an Iron Moon*

I swallowed an iron moon

they called it a screw

I swallowed industrial wastewater and unemployment forms

bent over the machines, our youth died young

I swallowed the hurry and the displacement

I swallowed bridges for pedestrian and this rusty life

I cannot swallow any more

everything that I swallowed flows back to my mouth

I spread across my motherland

a poem of shame[[17]](#endnote-17)

Other verses by Xu Lizhi offer chilling descriptions of the condition of workers in the despotic atmosphere of the factory.

*I Fell Asleep Standing like That*

The sheet of paper in front of the eyes yellows slightly  
I use the pen to mark over with various shades of black  
it is full of a worker's vocabulary  
workshop, assembly line, platform machine, work sheet, overtime, wage...  
by these words I was trained to be submissive

I cannot scream, I cannot resist  
I cannot accuse, I cannot complain  
I can only suffer my exhaustion in silence  
when I first arrived here

I was only hoping for the grey pay check of the tenth of the month   
that gives me a late consolation  
for this I have to grind off the edges and corners, grinding the language  
never skipped work, never a day of illness, never a day of personal break  
never arrived late, never left early  
I'm standing like iron next to the assembly line, my hands as if they were flying  
how many days and how many nights  
I fell asleep standing like that.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Such intense verses leave us with much to meditate on. The existence of poems written by migrant workers affirms the infinity of poetry against the oppression of any finitude. Clearly the way out of the hell in which these poems were written is still to be invented, but it will depend on the possible affirmation of creative subjectivities. How can this migrant proletariat of the contemporary world unite to abolish wage slavery?

We can glimpse at least one sign of trespassing towards an unprecedented political capacity. Mi Jiuping, a worker from a Shenzhen factory, who is also a poet, was arrested in July 2018 and today is still detained. He was indicted because he bravely attempted to organise an independent trade union. This poem, written in jail by Mi, became famous among the workers and was soon shared across several blogs and websites on labour, generating its own collective force.

*I am with us*

I stand atop a hill,

Seeing beyond the highest heavens,

The mountains crisp green,

The red sun rising.

I stand on the banks of a great river,

talking in the sight of the water,

the rolling waves

surging on endlessly.

I am a crane in a crowd of people,

I am silent beyond the outskirts,

I have lost family, love, and friendship,

O have lost all,

I have lost everything.

I will have family, love, friendship,

I will have all,

I will have everything.

Not today,

But in the not-distant future,

I am not me,

I am with us.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Xiao Kaiyu observed, with a touch of skeptical irony, that for Mao poetry could resurrect only when everyone would become poet in China. Is not the new wave of migrant workers poets a “Maoist” signal?

1. Xiao, Kaiyu. 1998. “Yidian ganxiang [A Few Reflections].”, *Jintian* [*Today*] 1: 213–15. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Yang Lian raised this point in many interviews and lectures. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Xiao, Kaiyu. 1995. “Xiang Du Fu zhi jing [Hommage to Du Fu].” *Jintian* [*Today*] 1: 74–81. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Meng, Lang. 1997. “Shiren zai ‘neibu’ zhaoji [The Poet Is Restless Inside].” In *Goutong: miandui shijiede Zhongguo wenxue* [*Communicate: Chinese Literature Facing the World*], edited by Wan Zhi, 131–32. Stockholm:The Olof Palme International Center*, Social Thought Press, Hong Kong*. pp. 131–32 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Qin, Xiaoyu, and Xiaobo Wu. 2015. *Wo de shipian: Dangdai gongren shidian* [*The Verses of Us: Contemporary Worker Poetry*], 396*.* Beijing: Zuojia Chubanshe. Translation by the author. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Guo, Jinniu. 2015. “Pangdade danshu [A Massively Single Number].” In *A Massively Single Number,* edited by Yang Lian, 152–53. Bristol: Shearsman Books. Translation by the author. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. *Ibid.* [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The poem can be found in Qin, Xiaoyu, and Xiaobo Wu. 2015. *The Verses of Us*, 170–72*.* Translation by the author. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Citations from Xing Huangtian’ series of poems “Xinling Shijian [Spiritual Facts].” In Qin, Xiaoyu, and Xiaobo Wu. 2015. *The Verses of Us*, 147–50. Translation by the author. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. *Ibid.* [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. The poem, included in the “Spiritual Facts” series can be found in Qin, Xiaoyu, and Xiaobo Wu. 2015. *The Verses of Us*, 149*.* Translation by the author. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. To use the expression put forward by Frank Ruda (2016) in his *Abolishing Freedom: A Plea for a Contemporary Use of Fatalism*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Xu, Lizhi. 2015. “Wo jiu nayang zhanzhe rushui [I Fell Asleep Standing So].” In *Xin de yi tian* [*A New Day*], edited by Qin Xiaoyu, 34. Beijing: Zuojia Chubanshe. Translation by the author. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Marx, Karl (translated by Joseph O’Malley). 1970. *Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right’*, Introduction. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. The translations of Ji Zhishui’s “Rocks by the Road” and “Migrant Workers” are both included in Goodman, Eleanor. 2016. *Iron Moon: An Anthology of Chinese Migrant Worker Poetry*, New York: White Pine Press, 170–71. The translations reproduced in the essay are by Eleanor Goodman. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Goodman, Eleanor. 2016. *Iron Moon*, 198. Translation by Eleanor Goodman, with a few variations by the author. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Xu, Lizhi. 2015. “I Fell Asleep Standing So.” [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Mi, Jiuping, 2018. “I Am with Us” is here proposed in the translation that appeared on the website *Labor Notes*. http.//www.labornotes.org/blogs/2018/11/jasic-detainee-1-story-w. Chinese text is available at https://zhichishengyuan01.github.io/mjp. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)